The Art of Ottoman Photography: Examining the Artistic Undertones in Late Ottoman Photographs

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Ottoman Photography: Which Lens to Look Through?

There exist few historical benchmarks more important than 1839 in the course of modern Ottoman history. Political revolutions in America and France had changed European conceptions of how government worked and the Ottoman Empire was beginning the process of dramatic political reforms known as the *Tanzimat*. The reforms got started with Sultan Abdulmecid's Rose Garden Decree—a declaration of the right to life and property for all Ottomans regardless of their religious confession—and continued to include drastic bureaucratic reorganization, military upgrades, and a clearer articulation of Ottoman rights. The Ottoman Empire was surging into a new age and preparing to politically, technologically, and militarily modernize.

The modernizations of 1839 however, were not limited to government reforms. There was something else afoot. 1839 was also the year that Louis Daguerre introduced his eponymous Daguerreotype to the world. The Daguerreotype was not the first camera, but it offered an unprecedented clarity unattainable to the first cameras of the late 1820's. For Western Europe the invention of photography was a truly modern phenomenon in the sense that it served as a sudden "final word" in the Western European quest for naturalism and scientific perspective a process that had begun in the European Renaissance in the fifteenth century. "Painting is dead!" was the cry of French History painter Paul Delaroche, who witnessed his extensive academic training eclipsed by this new machine.[1]

When the Ottomans themselves began adopting photography almost immediately after its invention in France, the medium was still understood to be a modernizing force.[2] However, it

[1] Farango, Jason. "Is Painting Dead?"
[2]Wendy M. K. Shaw, *Ottoman painting: Reflections of Western Art from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 10.

was modern in a uniquely Ottoman way. Photography, as well as the Western academic style of painting that gained prominence in the Ottoman Empire in the mid nineteenth century, was not envisioned as superseding past art forms, but rather was received as an entirely new medium. That is to say, this form of image making was not an attempt to correct the shortcomings of a flawed system as impressionism or fauvism were Western European attempts to break with and supersede tradition. The adoption of these new forms of representation were understood as a way to tap into the modernism already laid down in Europe and as working in cooperation with the Tanzimat project's aims to catch the Ottoman Empire up with its more technologically advanced neighbors.[3]

Amidst this time of aggressive and conscious modernization, photography was a royally patronized practice charged with bringing the Empire up to the status of its European neighbors while simultaneously maintaining a uniquely Ottoman form. The royally patronized Ottoman-born photographers charged with capturing the images were trusted with the important task of using this new medium to visually champion and advertise the modernizations of the Ottoman Empire to Western Europe. This task required the photographers to both proclaim the Empire's advances and maintain a tie to its rich and once-enviable past.

This thesis hopes to examine Ottoman photographers not just as documentarians tasked with recording new infrastructure projects, but also as artists within the context of the Empire's modernization projects. As the Tanzimat reforms were taking place, Western-style academic education was becoming more commonplace for painters and artists in the Ottoman Empire following the lead of Western Europe. These paintings are interpreted as attempts to, in a way, invert what their European counterparts were hoping to achieve with their Orientalist paintings.

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[3] Shaw*, Ottoman Painting,* 3.

Orientalist painters from France and elsewhere in Western Europe were quite fond of making pilgrimages to North Africa or the Eastern Mediterranean and painting fantasy scenes of sensuous women at the bath, provincials working on their local crafts, or ornately dressed musicians playing exotic instruments. The Orientalist practice was to use familiar methods to capture a (usually inaccurate and imagined) image of the unfamiliar. On the other hand, the Ottoman painters were using what was a previously non-Ottoman form and using it to capture the goings on of their Empire.[4] The photographers were charged with much the same task as the painters. However, unlike Ottoman painters, Ottoman photographers are often read more as documentarians than artists. This despite the fact that their work was displayed in artistic exhibitions alongside miniature paintings, book arts, and calligraphy, and despite the fact that the esteemed the Ottoman photographers of the royally patronized Abdullah Frères studio were known as "his majesty's artists."[5] It is my hope that a better understanding of the photographers' purpose can allow for more fruitful future artistic examination of Ottoman photographs.

Thesis Outline

The primary goal of my thesis is to understand nineteenth century Ottoman photographers as artists operating in the artistic milieu of the mid to late nineteenth century Ottoman Empire, using the collection of the Harry Ransom Center and the Library of Congress. To achieve this goal, I will address the following questions: What was the artistic atmosphere at the end of the Ottoman Empire? Can we even call Ottoman photography Ottoman? To what extent did these photographers understand themselves as artists in control of the camera? How did the sultans patronizing royal photographers understand the meaning of photography as art?

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[4] Ibid., 19.
[5] Öztuncay, Bahattin. *The Photographers of Constantinople: Pioneers, Studios and Artists from 19th Century Istanbul,* 190; Shaw, *Ottoman Painting,* 30.

And finally, with the appropriate answers to these questions, do we see a uniquely Ottoman eye in these photographs? I see in this progression of questions a path to more clearly articulating what it meant for the Sultan to refer to the Abdullah Frères photography studio as "his majesty's artists" and how those photographers capitalized on the great responsibility conferred by this title.[6]

Methodology

The crux of my analysis for this thesis will focus on my experience working with primary source images in the Sultan Abdülhamid II albums in the Library of Congress as well as photographs from the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Once I have articulated the historical and theoretical sentiments that prevailed in the nineteenth century Ottoman artistic atmosphere, I plan on spending most of my time focused on the images themselves. I will examine choices in both composition of the image and techniques used to create the photographs to break away from the narrative of these photographers as merely mechanical recorders of the technological advancements of the Empire. My analysis on composition of the image will draw largely from Ottoman ideas of visual truth and methods of looking. It will be very difficult to translate a visual tradition that (despite favoring Western European notions of naturalism by the nineteenth century) had for much of history been grounded in idealized miniature painting through the 'realism' and perspective that is associated with photograph. I believe however, that several frames for analysis will be fruitful: an understanding of the notions behind elevated vantage point painting, architectural compartmentalization of miniature scenes, and Ottoman ways of articulating hierarchy will better help us understand this translation.

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[6] Ibid., 30.

To lend support to my argument I will use Michael Charlesworth's article on the technique of photographic pioneer Fox Talbot and the hypocrisy of the eighteenth-century Englishman's views on photography, as a springboard for my argument that these Ottoman born photographers ought to be understood as Ottoman artists. Charlesworth's article centers on the fact that Talbot was unabashed in professing his belief that photography was "a recording of the world that is unmediated by human beings."[7] It then points out that Talbot and his colleagues were using techniques like blocked-out skies, overlays, and other manipulations to create an image could not be called "scientific" or "blind." I have observed manifestations of similar techniques in Ottoman photographs at the Library of Congress and will use these as justification for dispelling the scholarship suggesting that these photographers were neutral documenters of absolute truth.

I will then flesh out my argument regarding the artistic purpose behind these images by looking at Sultan Abdülhamid II's other patronage programs and how his royal photography studios functioned as part of that patronage. Much has been written on his album donations to the Library of Congress and British Museum as methods of showing of the splendor of the Ottoman Empire.[8] However in my quest to understand these images as works of art, I plan to take a closer look at his little-studied book patronage program intended to share the literary achievements of the Empire with an American audience. I hope to draw a connection between the book and photography donations and show that the photo albums, like the book donations, represent an

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[7]Michael Charlesworth, "Fox Talbot and the 'White Mythology' of Photography," *Word & Image* 11, no. 3 (1995): 211.

[8] To name two: Waley, Muhammad Isa, "Images of The Ottoman Empire: The Photograph Albums Presented by Sultan Abdülhamid II," The British Library Journal 17, no. 2 (1991): 111-27, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4255432; and William Allen, "The Abdul Hamid II collection," History of Photography 8, no. 2 (1984): , doi:10.1080/03087298.1984.10442205.

attempt to show the best of Ottoman artistry rather than analytically document a culture and people foreign to the United States.

My Contributions to the Field

The Sultan Abdülhamid Albums are hardly obscure or unknown albums of Ottoman photography; their location at the Library of Congress makes them among the most-accessible and best-organized collections of Ottoman photography in the United States. However, to my knowledge, few have attempted to analyze these images as uniquely Ottoman works of art. This is despite the photographers' inclusion in Ottoman art exhibitions and their receipt of royal patronage in the long tradition of the Ottoman Sultans' funding cultural output. It is my hope that this thesis will help open up Ottoman photography, specifically the Abdülhamid II albums, to artistic analysis that goes beyond the documentary potential of the medium and interprets Ottoman photographers as artists who were able to tie this new medium into their illustrious artistic tradition.

CHAPTER ONE
PAINTING AT THE END OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

"Ottoman art," as it is understood in museum collections, conjures up images of illuminated manuscripts, miniature paintings, and Iznik ceramics. The objects typically included in Ottoman museum collections range from the beginning of the Empire in 1299 to about 1800. After that latter point, the art historical boundaries become less clear. The categorization "Islamic," and by extension, "Ottoman," tends to lose momentum and almost disappear from art historiography in the nineteenth century despite the fact that the Empire kept producing art until its demise in 1922. After a hundred-year art historiographical lull, Islamic art is resurrected in 20th century art historiography under a title that is usually some variation on "Modern Art of the MENAM Region." That lull though, means that nineteenth century Ottoman painting and photography tend to slip through the cracks of art historical analysis.

On the one hand this is a drastic oversight; it would be wrong to assume that Ottoman art ended in the nineteenth century and wrong to assume that only in the twentieth century did it take on a new form. However, there is a sense in which this historiographic break is understandable. It is often difficult at first glance to find any sort of visual continuity between what is today called Islamic Art—calligraphy, miniature paintings, painted ceramics, etc.—and the art forms and representational modes, specifically photography, that began to arise in the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Ottoman painting in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had a mode of interpretation that would not seem to be immediately reconcilable with the unavoidable 'realism' of photography. The goals of Ottoman figural arts were not realism, naturalism, or scientific perspective limited by the position of the Western "window into the world," but rather an aesthetic that fostered an omniscient way of viewing an idealized, perfect world. In this way, an artist could depict multiple non-contiguous activities with equal detail and reverence.

Fig. 1. Painter B. 'Süleyman Conversing with Mustafa.' 1558. *Süleymanname.* From: Esin Atıl. *Süleymanname: the Illustrated History of Süleyman the Magnificent.* Washington,. National Gallery of Art, 1987. Plate 48.

A fine example of this visual philosophy can be found in a painting of *Sultan Süleyman Conversing with Mustafa* (Fig. 1) from the *Süleymanname,* an illuminated history from 1558 depicting the reign of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent. There is an undeniable abstract and two-dimensional quality to this work. "Space," in accordance with Ottoman miniature painting tradition of the sixteenth century, is not treated as an object with any kind of volume in this image.[9] That is to say, there is no sense in which the empty space separating two objects must necessarily be depicted. What might be depicted as empty space in a photograph is in this painting filled in with elaborate foliage or architectural elements that press against the plane of the page rather than recede back into three-dimensional space. This allowed the artist to dedicate the entirety of the page to the scene. There is no sense that certain fixtures are there only to frame the main subject matter. Each part of this painting, even the corners with their flowing calligraphy, has its own localized composition and each part of the painting is given equal reverence with regards to beauty and detail.

The image depicts Süleyman, along with one his son Mustafa and two attendants sitting in a three-story pavilion. The Sultan peers out the window while directing his gaze down to the two ducks swimming in his garden and listening to the tambourine and lute players. In the bottom left of the image, two bearded, hat-wearing officials at the entrance of the pavilion converse and take in what appears on the surface to be a very peaceful atmosphere. In reality though, what appears to be a pleasant royal genre scene carries more gravity than is immediately apparent. The bow and arrow in the Sultan's hand suggest an underlying tension in the scene.

[9] Shaw, *Ottoman Painting,* 11.

The weapons may foreshadow the prince's eventual death by strangulation per his father's orders.[10]

The scene here is not extraordinary in terms of its historical significance but it is a strong example of the freedoms afforded to an artist liberated from the hard confines of 'scientific' perspective. A photographer trying to capture this scene would face great technical hurdles. Even if the photographer could overcome the problem of penetrating the pavilion walls to depict the Sultan and his son, it would be another challenge to give relatively equal weight to the characters in the pavilion and the activities going on in the courtyard down below. If the photograph were taken at the sultan's eye level, the courtyard below would appear to be a smaller afterthought separated by a story's-worth of empty space and shrunken by the confines of its distance from the camera.

With the "traditional" Ottoman method of depiction, which was itself an adoption and variation on Persian painting, the artist can assign equal (or at least similar) gravity to each part of the scene. The omnipresent viewer who almost hovers above the scene can focus on the sultan's gaze and gold-embroidered robes in one glance and in another, contemplate tiling patterns on the fountain and the detailed ceramics and musical instruments whereas the photographer would have to choose between depicting one set of details or another.

[10] Esin Atıl, *Süleymanname: the Illustrated History of Süleyman the Magnificent* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1987), 196.

Most of the paintings in the *Süleymanname* as well as those in other manuscript paintings did invite this same omnipresent and multi-perspective approach to viewing. The purpose of this elevated, omnipresent view was not simply a means of creating a unique meaning but also understood to be a method of precise documentation. Ottoman painters used topographical vantage points rather than scientific perspective to most accurately and authentically depict a particular place or historical event.[11]

Fig. 2. Matrakçı, *View of Nice*. c. 1540, 34 x 25 cm. From: Günsel Rendal et al. *A History of Turkish Painting.* Genève: Palasar in association with the University of Washington Press, 1988. Plate 34.

[11] Günsel Rendal et al., *A History of Turkish Painting* (Genève: Palasar in association with the University of Washington Press, 1988), 48.

Images like this view of Nice (Fig. 2) were meant to document the layout and contours of stops on military or economic expeditions and are so accurate that even today scholars use them as documentary sources.[12] Topographical paintings, with their unique abilities to depict a particular setting with a certain cartographic quality, continued to be valued as the most "accurate" representations as Ottoman painting even as artists gravitated towards greater adoption of three-dimensionality and shading amidst increased familiarity with Western forms in the seventeenth century.[13] It may seem odd to describe a scene with blue hills and buildings outside the city limits that are as almost as long as the city itself as accurate or authentic, but this apparent contradiction would not have been outlandish in the mind of an Ottoman viewer. Everyone knows that the hills of Nice are not actually covered in blue trees and that houses are not miles long , but these manipulations may give a viewer a fuller understanding of the sensation if being in Nice and communicate things that a mimetic painting could not. No, the hills are not blue, but they do rise up into the brilliantly blue French Riviera sky and no, the buildings in the countryside are not gigantic, towering compounds, but they may stand out prominently over the city and watch over the harbor as ships sail into port.

[12] Rendal, *A History*, 47.
[13] Ibid., 49.

Changing Perspectives on Ottoman Art

The topographical and two-dimensional approach to painting remained strong in the Ottoman painting tradition through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Ottoman painters appeared to grow more comfortable with using techniques like shading and naturalistic perspective in their paintings. Images like *Madrasa of Gazanger Ağa* (Fig. 3) show a kind of attention to perspective not seen in the *Süleymanname*. The bearded students in the classroom are recessed diagonally back into space in contrast with the "stacked" characters in the scene from the *Süleymanname.* The arcades in the upper corners of the image suggest the existence of a path that disappears back behind the space of the image.

Fig. 3. Nadiri, *Madrasa of Gazanfer Ağa*. c. 1620, 18 x 12 cm. Topkapı Palace. From: Günsel Rendal et al. *A History of Turkish Painting.* Genève: Palasar in association with the University of Washington Press, 1988. Plate 38.

By the eighteenth century these subtle perspectival evolutions accelerated drastically as the Empire began to increase its political, economic, and cultural ties to Western Europe. Sultan Ahmet III (1703-1730) emptied the Empire's coffers pursuing literary, musical, and artistic patronage programs.[14] The period also marked what was at the time the most explicit opening of the Empire to Western European economic and cultural exchange.[15] The introduction of the first Ottoman language printing press in 1727 as well as the employment of Europeans for military engineering and reorganization were but a few manifestations of this new political and economic policy.[16] However, even a cursory glance at the paintings of this period reveals that the influence of this closer European contact was not only limited to politics. Though painting in this period largely maintained its traditional subject matter, painters began to show an increased interest in naturalistic perspective.

Images like *Sheikh Baba Attacking the Bandits* (Fig. 4) adopted familiar subject matter with new modes of depiction. Scenes of military escapades were among the most preferred subjects for the artists of the *Süleymanname.* However, the topographical point of view and two-dimensional quality of the sixteenth century has clearly been taken a step further. The scene is painted at the level of the riders, who now betray more emotion in their naturalistic and differentiated faces. Only the white horse closest to the front plane of the image is fully visible. Every other rider is forced, by the necessities of this use of more naturalistic perspective, to be at least partially obscured behind the lead horses. Furthermore, there is now a clear distinction

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[14] Ibid., 51.
[15] Ibid., 51.
[16] Hakan Karateke, *Encyclopedia of Islam,* s.v. "Ahmed III," , accessed February 22, 2017, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/ahmed-iii-COM_23739?s.num=0&s.rows=20&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-3&s.q=Ahmad III.

between background and foreground that was not seen in the earlier *Süleymanname* paintings. Were this image to have the topographical treatment given to the view of Nice, the buildings across the river at the top of the painting of Sheikh Baba would, instead of receding back, have been depicted as though one on top of the other in order to show each building's geographic relationship to its neighbors. Instead, we can only see the buildings closest to the viewer.

Fig. 4. Atayi, 'Sheikh Baba attacking the bandits.' 1728. 12.8 x 11.1 cm. The manuscript *Hamse* in Topkapı Palace Museum. From: Günsel Rendal et al. *A History of Turkish Painting*. Genève: Palasar in association with the University of Washington Press, 1988. Plate 48.

Political and Artistic Tanzimat

A survey of the selected images might suggest that Ottoman painting was, like its Western European counterpart, embarking on a conscious path towards increased naturalism and greater use of perspective. While it is undeniable that Ottoman painting took an increased *interest* in the perspective, shading, and naturalism often associated with European painting, it is difficult to call this an "evolution" in the normative sense of the word; It would be disingenuous to say that Ottoman painters spent those centuries struggling to equalize the feats of naturalism already attained in the more "advanced" West. Ottoman artists in the fifteenth century proved themselves capable of naturalistic portraiture which depicted its subjects seated in a perspectivaly advanced three-quarters view (Fig. 5). The development of increased naturalism and scientific perspective then ought to be read more as a conscious choice and experimentation with new forms rather than a slow struggle towards a final goal that the Western Europeans had already reached.

The gradual drift towards a preference for naturalistic painting, aided by the work of Greek and Armenian court painters who rose to prominence in the mid eighteenth century, further emphasizes that point. By this time in history, the Empire was not as technologically or militarily advanced as its Western European neighbors and after revolutions in France and America it was growing increasingly clear that the days of the European monarchies were numbered. In response to these factors, the Ottoman Empire embarked on a sweeping plan to update itself in nearly all aspects of empire. This meant upgrading the military, building schools, and passing constitutional reforms.

Fig. 5. Sinan, ‘Portrait of Mehmed II.’ 1475. 29 x 27 cm. Album in the Topkapı Palace Museum. From: Günsel Rendal et al. *A History of Turkish Painting.* Genève: Palasar in association with the University of Washington Press, 1988. Plate 24.

Modernization though, was not merely a technological or political practice. It was, for the Ottoman elite, a cultural project as well. However, that modernization took on a different meaning than the modernization taking place in Western Europe. European modernism, evolving over the course of the nineteenth century, took a keen interest in breaking norms and shocking establishment salons. In 1800, the Ottoman Empire did not have an established salon tradition to break with. That is not to say that Ottoman art was not breaking with traditions and conventions

in the nineteenth century, it most certainly was, but the underlying motivation for Ottoman modernism was not a desire to topple restrictive conventions. Furthermore, it was the Ottoman government, even the sultan himself, who helped catalyze this modernization project. There was no "Salon de Refusés" to irritate the cultural establishment. In the Ottoman view, Europe had achieved modernism, and the way for the Ottoman Empire to join in was not to have a *Luncheon on the Grass* moment but rather to adopt the "modernity perceived to have been already laid down in Europe," while simultaneously maintaining a uniquely Ottoman voice in the final product.[17]

Ottoman elites, who increasingly adopted cultural practices that would have been familiar to their Western European counterparts, began to take a greater interest in inviting Western European sculptors and painters to decorate new Baroque and Rococo style residences in the Ottoman capital.[18] In 1845 the first known painting exhibition in the Empire, a display of landscape paintings, was presented at the Old Çırağan Palace in Istanbul.[19] The increased influence of the Ottoman language printing press meant that hand-written books and the miniature paintings that accompanied them were becoming less and less prominent and Ottoman patrons were happy to let European canvas paintings and sculpture fill the void.[20]

This Ottoman modernization though, was not just something that could be bought and hung on a wall. There was a conscious effort on the part of the Ottoman artistic community to ensure that Ottoman-born painters were themselves contributing to this new movement. In the 1830's, in addition to teaching their own classes on naturalistic, European-style painting, military

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[17] Shaw, *Ottoman Painting,* 3.
[18] Ibid., 19, 20.
[19] Ibid., 21.
[20] Rendal, *A History*, 69.

schools began sending students to Europe to take classes in painting and engraving.[21] Other painters received training in naturalistic painting at *Darüşşafaka*, a charitable school designed to prepare orphans for gainful employment.[22] Prior to the establishment of the Fine Arts Academy in 1883 military schools, *Darüşşafaka*, or exchanges in Europe were the only options for learning naturalistic painting in the Ottoman Empire.[23]

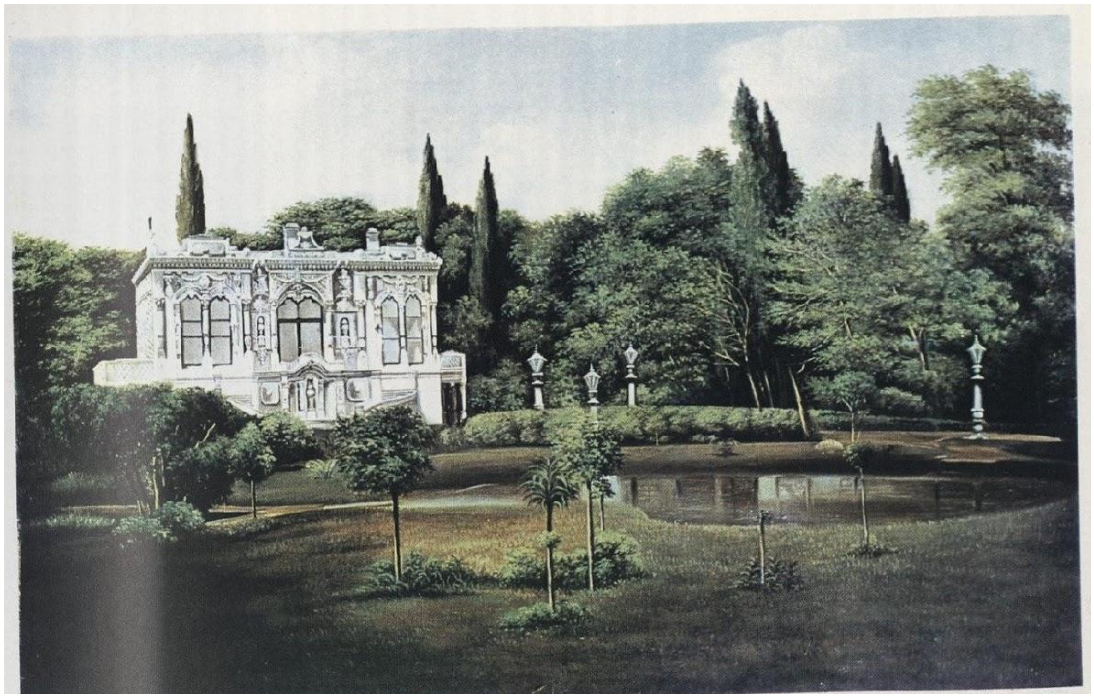

Fig. 6. Ibrahim. *Ihlamur Palace-Istanbul*. c. 1890. 62 x 91.5 cm. Museum of Painting and Sculpture of Istanbul. From: Günsel Rendal et al. *A History of Turkish Painting.* Genève: Palasar in association with the University of Washington Press, 1988. Plate 97.

Many of the paintings from this period, particularly the landscapes that were so widely produced, have a very photographic quality to them in the sense that there is a kind of sharpness to the details and a very uniform quality to the lighting (Fig 6). This is not surprising given that copying from photographs was a significant part of the curriculum in these schools. These

[21]Ibid., 92.
[22] Ibid., 93.
[23] Ibid., 93.

paintings, as well as later works from artists like Osman Hamdi Bey (who trained in Paris under the orientalist painter Léon Gérôme) do not appear to be evolutions from the previous miniature tradition but rather were attempts to adopt an entirely new form of painting. Painting directly from photography or by using models—as was the case with Hamdi and his French-trained contemporaries—represented a departure from the previous miniature-painting philosophy that sought to depict objects not through mimesis but rather through "representation of perceptual reality," that is to say, through a mode of depiction that seeks to function as a reflection of an idealized form of an object.[24]

Is it Ottoman?

If it is indeed true that nineteenth century Ottoman painting is not so much a final leap in what was a centuries-long pursuit of three-dimensionality but instead an entirely new form of painting imported from the West, does that mean it cannot be called "Ottoman" art? Would it be disingenuous to call it anything but Western-European art painted by Ottomans? Is it rote cultural appropriation? The answer to all three of these questions is, I believe, no.

There is something uniquely Ottoman about these nineteenth century paintings. To begin with, they are a specific product of their time in Ottoman history. The Tanzimat reforms sought to paint the Empire as a modern power on an equal footing with France and England. Technology, as well as the adaptation of a new art form, was enough to at least give the impression that the Ottoman Empire was a modern power. However, the goal of the Ottoman Empire's reforms was not to become France or England. This was an Empire proud of its esteemed history and culture. In this context the photograph-based landscape paintings do not appear to be evolutions of the garden seen in the *Süleymanname* illuminations, and I doubt that I

[24] Shaw, *Ottoman Painting,* 11.

would be able to distinguish a painting by Osman Hamdi Bey from another by Gérôme without further training. However there does still appear to be a desire to turn the vision of these Western forms onto the Empire in a process that Wendy M.K. Shaw refers to as a reversal of Orientalism.[25] While Europeans used a familiar medium to depict the unfamiliar, nineteenth century Ottoman painters used the unfamiliar form to capture the familiar scene of a mosque surrounded by landscape or men conversing in a courtyard (Fig. 7). A form of depiction that was decidedly un-Ottoman in origin had become Ottoman in content and context.

[25] Ibid., 19.

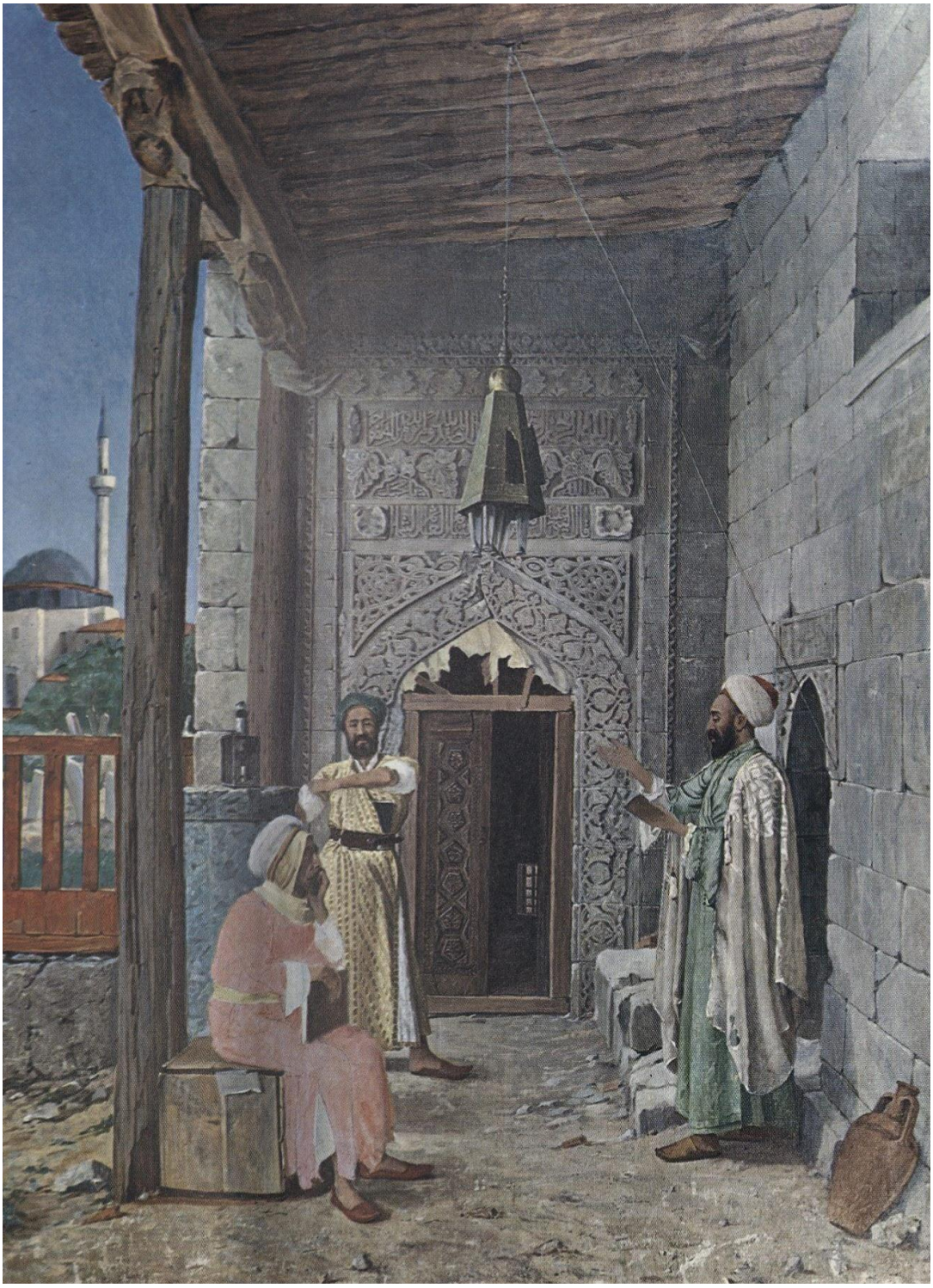

Fig. 7. Osman Hamdi Bey, *Hodjas Conversing in the Courtyard of a Mosque.* c. 1908 - 1910. 140 x 105 cm. Museum of Painting and Sculpture of Istanbul. From: Günsel Rendal et al. *A History of Turkish Painting.* Genève: Palasar in association with the University of Washington Press, 1988. Plate 112.

CHAPTER TWO
CAN A MACHINE MAKE OTTOMAN ART?

What does "art" mean in the Ottoman context?

Writing about whether or not a nineteenth century Ottoman image is art or not is a tricky proposition. Saying "I study Ottoman art" in modern Turkish—*Osmanlı sanat tarihi öğrenim*—will sometimes yield the response, "Do you study literature, music, or painting?" The Turkish word *sanat* does not have quite the same meaning nor necessarily the same immediate association with the visual arts as its heavily loaded English counterpart "art." For much of Ottoman history there was no clear hierarchical distinction between what Italian Renaissance-centric art history referred to as "high" and "decorative" arts. An ornately painted ceramic work was a work of art just as much as an illuminated manuscript or a miniature painting. In addition to this fact, *ressam*—the Turkish word for painter—could be used to denote any kind of image maker and would not necessarily have been sufficient to distinguish between the connotations behind the English words "documentarian" and "artist."

Ottoman painters, like many of their Western European counterparts before the nineteenth century, worked in a workshop setting meaning that an Ottoman artist, especially prior to the eighteenth century, would not have signed a painting, which would often have been created as part of a royally patronized illustrated manuscript, as his own.[26] Instead, multiple artists would have collaborated on different parts of the painting; one artist may have specialized in flowers, one in architecture, one in horses. Ottoman paintings, though they seem to a Western

[26]Rendal, *A History*, 18.

viewer to be so stylized as to be unsuited for any historical or documentary role, were actually quite often used to illustrate historical scenes.

Under Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566) history painting flourished as an art form. *The Süleymanname,* a history of the events of Suleiman's reign, depicted the expected battle scenes and conquests, but also more mundane scenes like archery exercises, festivals, and comet sightings.[27] The purpose of the paintings in *The Süleymanname* was of course to help recount the history of the Sultan. The artists though, also used elaborate decorations and stylized figures to elevate Suleiman the Magnificent's deeds, suggest that the ruler was worthy of his "Magnificent" moniker, and project the political, military, and cultural splendor of the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman artist in this context then was tasked with depicting an accurate history, while simultaneously using stylization, ornamentation, and other tropes to infuse the scene with a uniquely Ottoman brand of truth and beauty.

Figuring out how to fit photography within this context then, is a difficult task. On the one hand, the traditionally less restrictive standards for entry into the category of Ottoman art may seem to provide easy access for photography's entry into the realm of art. Conversely by the nineteenth century, Turkish elites were embracing Western notions of the term "art" and beginning to put on the first fine art exhibitions in the Ottoman Empire. Contradictions aside, if Ottoman photographers understood themselves as scientists recording the world with disinterested precision, there is not a whole lot to take away from an Ottoman photograph apart from an examination of whatever happens to be the subject. If, instead, photographers had an interest in exercising agency over this medium, inserting a particular message into this new mode of image making, and inserting uniquely Ottoman understandings of truth and beauty into their

[27] Rendal, *A History*, 20.

images, then photographs can become a wealth of knowledge about nineteenth century Ottoman understandings of empire and art.

Innocent Modernism?

Any attempt to understand Ottoman photography as an art form must first dispel the notion of Ottoman photographers as practitioner of what Wendy M.K. Shaw, one of the few experts in late Ottoman art, calls "innocent modernism." According to Shaw, photography came into the Ottoman Empire "exclusively as a technology, divorced from its links to pictorial tradition."[28] An Ottoman photographer's relationship with the camera then was no deeper than a scientist's relationship to a microscope. A scientist will see only what the lens displays and an Ottoman photographer will depict only what the lens captures. The innocent modernists in Shaw's view were like scientists in the sense that they were but a part in the mechanical process of capturing reality. The newness of the medium itself was enough to make a photograph modern.

Shaw's analysis of Ottoman photographs as purely scientific documents takes specific aim at the Sultan Abdülhamid II albums that the Ottoman ruler had sent to the Library of Congress in 1893. The albums are, according to Shaw, "documentary and ethnographic, showing little concern for the artistic conventions that informed the construction of photographic genres in Europe."[29] The photographer then was a kind of documentarian using the camera not as a new medium to create art or multi-layered meaning, but rather as a tool to capture "informative elements rather than compositionally meaningful overviews."[30]

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[28] Wendy M. K. Shaw, "Ottoman Photography of the Late Nineteenth Century: An 'Innocent' Modernism?," *History of Photography* 33, no. 1 (2009), 80.
[29] Shaw, "Innocent Modernism," 83.
[30] Ibid., 88.

Most of the photographs that Shaw analyzes do fit nicely into this framework. The majority of the 51 albums in the Abdülhamid II collection are filled with rather dry portraits of students, school buildings, and military works. Many of these images appear to function primarily, if not solely, as documentary listings in Abdülhamid II's project to catalogue the Ottoman Empire's modernization efforts. Photographs of students are posed almost identically to each other and the images of schools are often comically dry and impervious to artistic analysis. But these photographs do not tell the whole story of Ottoman photographers' relationship with the camera in the Abdülhamid II albums or elsewhere.

Losing Innocence

The labeling of Ottoman photographers as innocent modernists poses a few issues that have been inherent in understandings of photography since its inception. British photographic pioneer Fox Talbot's writings on the medium espoused a significance similar to the one that Shaw assigns to Ottoman photographers. In his book *The Pencil of Nature*—a collection of photographs with accompanying commentary—Talbot proudly champions the view that "light" and "Nature" alone are responsible for creating the image and the practice requires no aid "of anyone acquainted with the art of drawing."[31] Talbot viewed himself as a kind of scientist who could capture a scene in a perfectly truthful manner.

And yet, closer analysis of Talbot's photography proves that if he was a scientist, he was not an honest one, as a significant number of his photographs have been manipulated for aesthetic effect. Photographers in the nineteenth century knew how to create composite prints from multiple negatives (Fig. 8), controlled the amount of light being exposed to certain images, and inked out the skies in their negatives in order to ensure that the sky appeared as a uniform

[31] Charlesworth, "White Mythology," 213.

field in the final image (Fig. 9).[32] Talbot corroborates his sins further by including an image titled "A scene in a library" (Fig. 10). The image, for good reason it turns out, does not include any accompanying commentary. Analysis of the photo reveals that it was not taken in a library, but rather outdoors in natural light.[33] The photographer, though he may have aspired to be a disinterested scientist, had strong authority over the final printed product. The disinterested nature of the process of the image's creation, it turned out, was a lie.

Ottoman photographers were also quite complicit in this practice of exercising agency over the camera by asserting their agency between the shutter closing and the development of the negative. Even the most seemingly uninteresting photos in the Abdülhamid II albums betray signs of manipulation. A photo, taken by an unknown photographer, titled "The Lifesaving Crew at Riva" seems, on the surface, to fit right into Shaw's perception of Ottoman photographers as agents charged with disinterestedly capturing images of modernism (Fig. 11).

[32] Ibid., 211.
[33] Ibid., 214.

Fig. 8.Henry Peach Robinson. *When the Day's Work is Done*. 1877. Composite albumen silver print from multiple negatives. From: The J. Paul Getty Museum, https://goo.gl/Pg4v8Y (accessed April 25, 2017).

Fig. 9.John Shaw Smith. *Fountain of Trevi*. ca 1850-51. Calotype negative with sky inked out. From Luminous-Lint, https://goo.gl/Rdi7Yu.

Fig. 10.William Henry Fox Talbot. “A Scene in a Library” (plate VIII) from “The Pencil of Nature.” 1844–1846. Salt print from paper negative. Yale University Art Gallery, Gift of George Hopper Fitch, B.A. 1932, 1989.12.13. From: Yale News, https://goo.gl/DPfT4H.

Fig. 11. Unknown. *The lifesaving crew at Riva*. Between 1880 and 1893. Photograph. From: The Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/2003668387/.

The image is included in an album of 31 photos alongside other pictures of naval officers, ship constructions, and firefighting drills. The album is, as Shaw states, a demonstration of the Ottoman Empire's new technologies and seeks to portray the Empire as a modern technological power. Closer examination of the image, shows that the photographer was not a disinterested party intent on capturing the image as the eye would see it and then rubber-stamping it for print. The horizon line reveals spots where the photographer's hand slipped while trying to ink out the sky on the negative. These streaks, which are unfortunately too faint to see in the image provided above, are not the mark of a poorly made albumen sheet. These white streaks instead show where

the photographer's hand slipped while trying to ink out the sky on the negative. The sky was a difficult subject for early photographers. Early cameras were very sensitive to blue light meaning that a clear blue sky would appear as a white blaze if the photo was exposed for land. Conversely, if the photo was exposed for the sky, everything on land would be too faint to distinguish.[34] This post-production manipulation meant that the sky appeared as a nicely uniform grey field where the inked-out portion of the negative was unable to develop on the final image.

There was clearly intent on the part of the photographer to control the image in post-production work. Such manipulations remove the façade of disinterestedness from the scene. It could already be assumed that the men in the image were carefully posed, but finding manipulations like painting over the sky call further attention to the photographer's hand in this supposedly scientific image. If the photographer did not feel that he had to leave the sky in its natural state, what else could be edited and more importantly, what message could these edits convey? Touching up the sky is perhaps the most innocent manipulation a photographer could make to an image, but it does nonetheless open up the possibility for inquiry into how photographers were going beyond their perceived charter to accurately capture reality and insert their own, or the Sultan's particular message.

[34] Fineman, Mia. Faking it: manipulated photography before photoshop. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013, 11.

Other photographs by Paschal Sebah, an Istanbul-based photographer and the father of Abdülhamid II album contributor Jean-Pascal Sebah, in the collection of the Harry Ransom Center show a much more heavy-handed manipulation. One image in particular, depicting the Great Sphinx at Giza, shows the extent not just of Sebah's attempts to manipulate the image in the post-production process, but also his desire to compose his scene in just the way Shaw says Ottoman photographers could not (Fig. 12).

Fig. 12. Pascal Sebah. 'Sphynx.' C. 1880. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

The sky again appears to by whited out in this image. In the left edge of the horizon, a blot of some sort, perhaps ink spilt when the negative was transferred to the image plate, betrays the photographer's hand in whiting out the sky. It also suggests that the smoothness of the horizon to the left of the butte even with the Sphinx's nose may be due to the photographer

painting over natural aberrations in order to eliminate some aspect of the horizon that was aesthetically unpleasing.

Other manipulations betray more information about how a photographer might use the production process to control the meaning of the image. An examination of the pyramid at the top right of the image reveals the fact that the top of the monument appears to disappear into the clouds. Given the already established manipulations to the sky as well as the fact that the Sahara Desert is not conducive to overcast skies, it is quite possible that this would have been a conscious manipulation on the part of the photographer. A well-known technique, known as dodging, involved photographers waving a screen over a particular area of the printing surface during the development process to decrease the amount of light being exposed to the surface. The affected area would then appear lighter than the rest of the image due to the lack of light being exposed to the affected area.

One can only speculate on the intended meaning of the technique in this particular case. The set of 32 photos where the Sebah shot of the sphinx was found include further images of temples, pyramids, and other Egyptian antiquities. From the composition of the images it does not appear that Sebah was trying to capture photos of Egypt through the detached framework of Innocent Modernism. Many of Sebah's images show a strong attention to aesthetic and meaningful composition.

Fig. 13. Pascal Sebah. ‘Pyramids.’ C. 1880. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

Fig. 14. Pascal Sebah, ‘People on Pyramid’ c. 1880, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

One image of the Pyramids of Giza is particularly beautiful in its composition alone (Fig. 13). The weight of the three stone pyramids in the top left corner is countered by a tree and a group of three seated men, all struggling to match the visual impact of the millennia-old monuments in the background. The stream that cuts diagonally from bottom left to top right of the foreground divides the image neatly into two parts and serves as a reminder that the viewer is physically, and perhaps temporally, separated from the true subject of the image.

Perhaps Shaw could still consider this image from within her Innocent Modernist framework. A scientific image can still betray the hand and eye of a photographer interested in composition. However, other Sebah images have compositions with aims that go beyond mere pleasurable appearance. One particularly interesting image shows a group of two trousered European men and a woman in a ruffled Victorian dress looking rather unflattering and out of place as they climb up the side of a pyramid (Fig. 14). The improperly clothed Europeans are aided by a group of men, presumably Egyptians, dressed not in pantsuits but flowing robes that appear much better suited for climbing. Sebah's keen eye for texture and composition is apparent in the photograph. The oblique sunlight on the pyramid wall has the effect of revealing every pock and crevice on the ancient buildings surface and the light hitting the rocks that jut out from the pyramid's wall throw a checkerboard of shadows across the image. The people in the image, all frozen in various states of climbing, are also arranged in a kind of helix that curves up from the bottom right of the image and gives the scene a sense of dynamism by combatting the perfectly diagonal composition suggested by the checkerboard of stones and shadows.

Sebah's photograph appears to be a visually pleasing, well-composed action shot of Europeans climbing a bit of history with the help of their local guides. The only issue with this interpretation is the fact that it was not technologically possible at the time to take a true action

shot of climbers like these while simultaneously maintaining the longer exposure time needed to bring out the texture and detail of the stones. Photo technology at the time did not yet allow for the shorter exposure times and shutter speeds necessary to capture an action shot without sacrificing detail. Blurs in a billowing robe as well as flapping coattails, betray this fact (Fig. 15). Some sort of manipulation would have been necessary in order to create this scene.

Fig. 15. Pascal Sebah, Details from 'People on Pyramid' c. 1880, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

Another shot, a public square in Alexandria, from the same collection of Sebah photos more clearly shows this problem (Fig. 16). The candid shot of the square is dotted with ghostly blurs where locals, blissfully ignorant of the photographer's concerns, crossed the square too fast for the slow-developing camera to capture them in all their detail. The only figures that do have clear silhouettes in the shot of the town square are those who remained seated at the edge of a fountain or stopped and stood for a moment in the square.

The action shot of the climbers then is not an action shot at all. Viewers may have perceived it to be so, but the concealed reality of the image, different from the perceived reality, is that this is a posed scene. When Abdülhamid II sent his collection of photographs to the Library of Congress, he was certainly trying to use photographs to provide Americans with a true understanding of the Empire. However, reducing the photographers to "innocent modernists" obscures the fact that they exercised authority over the apparatus of the camera. There are Ottoman photographs, including many in the Abdülhamid albums, that appear to focus on the documentary rather than artistic potential of photography. However, it is clear that Ottoman photographers knew how to manipulate the documentary suggestions of photography to create an image that was different from what actually took place before the lens. It would be an exaggeration to say that photography only had as much documentary value as painting. Nevertheless, the Ottoman photographer, like a painter, did exert enough authority over the camera to create an image that reflected his interpretation of the scene.

Fig. 16. Pascal Sebah, ‘City Courtyard’ c. 1880, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

CHAPTER THREE
WHO SAYS SO?

It is clear from the posed scenes and post-production edits that Ottoman photographers had agency over the camera and were able to control what they did and did not depict. In terms of determining whether or not a photograph is art, establishing agency is an essential criterion but it is not the only one. A photographer can have agency over an image and still understand his role to be more akin to that of a scientist or a documentarian even if he prefers to call attention to the aesthetic qualities of a photograph. It would be disingenuous to use an art historical framework to interpret a photograph, or perhaps even an X-ray, that was taken without any aspirations to art or meaning beyond documenting the subject.

If an Ottoman photographer understood himself to be an artist in addition to exhibiting agency over the apparatus of the camera, then it is at least worth glancing at these images through an art historical framework. That is to say, it is worth studying the image to try and determine something about how the photographer used the photograph to create meaning, incite a specific reaction, or reflect some aspect of his identity. The form and conception of Ottoman art in the nineteenth century was different from that of Ottoman art in centuries prior, but nevertheless it appears that Ottoman photographers at the time saw themselves as a part of the Empire's nineteenth century program of artistic patronage and display.

Technology on Display

The cultural movers and shakers in nineteenth century Western Europe spent quite a lot of energy debating whether or not photography could be an art form. Painters were understandably concerned that their profession was going to be made obsolete by laymen armed with nothing more than a mechanical contraption. In the period of the advent of photography, few people outside of the scientific realm would have bothered to acquire the chemicals and metals necessary to take and develop a photograph. Because of this, it was not uncommon for early pioneers of photography to come from scientific rather than artistic backgrounds.[35] Fox Talbot was an amateur scientist, and it was an astronomer, Sir John Herschel, who invented the word "photography."[36] On the other hand, Realist painters—that is to say, those of the prevailing art historical sentiment in mid to late nineteenth century Western Europe—claimed that 'one can only paint what one sees.'[37] It would seem that a medium like photography would fit quite nicely into these parameters.

Photography exhibition practices in nineteenth century Western Europe were equally conflicted. Museums, international fairs, and mechanics' institutes, all hosted exhibitions in the nineteenth century.[38] However, each exhibition space placed the photographs in a very different context. Nineteenth century photographs, especially in the early part of the century, were often exhibited in museums associated with design and industrial production.[39] The camera, like the steam engine, was a product of the industrial revolution. The camera's ability to capture an

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[35] Therese Mulligan et al., *Photography from 1839 to today: George Eastman House*, Rochester, NY (Koln: Taschen, 2000), 272.
[36]Ibid.
[37] Volker Kahmen and Brian Tubb, *Photography as art. Translated by Brian Tubb* (London: Studio Vista, 1974), 17. 17
[38] Sarah Bassnet, *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography*, ed. John Hannavy (New York, N.Y: Routledge, 2008), s.v. "Exhibitions of Photography," 509.
[39]Sarah Bassnet, *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography*, 509.

image with apparent scientific accuracy would have been fascinating to a nineteenth century viewer. However, it may be disingenuous to view nineteenth photographs in this particular display context as works of art especially if the photographers did not have aspirations to that end.

Not all nineteenth century photographs on display in Western Europe were found in industrial museums. Photographs were an important part of international fairs. The 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition marked the first time that photography had a dedicated pavilion at an international exhibition, though photographs were also displayed in exhibits devoted to industrialization projects, anthropological specimens and national and colonial exhibition spaces.[40] A few outlier museums like The Museum of Ornamental Art—Later the Victoria and Albert Museum—started collecting photographs in the middle of the century, but when it came to displaying photographs, art museums seemed to be in the minority in comparison to their industrial counterparts.[41] Organizations like the Photographic Society of London and the Société Française de Photographie, which counted Vichen Abdullah of the Abdullah Frères studio among its members, held salon-style exhibitions in the 1850's, and towards the end of the nineteenth century it became increasingly common to display photographs as works of art. But it would be a stretch to say that photographers were widely recognized on a national or institutional level as artists on par with court painters or sculptors.

[40] Ibid., 508.
[41] Ibid., 509.

Ottoman Display Practices

Given the cultural circumstances of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century it would be difficult to predict how photography might have been displayed from context alone. The rise of Ottoman photography coincided with the Tanzimat reforms and the desire to project an image of the Empire as a modern industrial power. Perhaps this could have relegated photography to a position alongside other technological advances, and it may have meant that merely demonstrating access to photography and using it to document modernization was sufficient for the Ottoman Empire. On the other hand, the rise of Ottoman photography also followed the gradual Ottoman adaptation of Western European-style naturalism in painting, so perhaps it would have been easy to adopt photography in the artistic canon. Then again, photography was a distinctly Western European invention (eleventh-century Basra polymath Ibn al-Haytham's treatises on the camera obscura notwithstanding), and its seemingly unavoidable 'realism' seems incompatible with an Ottoman artistic tradition that favored meaningful abstraction over scientific naturalism. Without any hard evidence to answer the question, it would be difficult to speculate how photography would have been displayed in the latter years of the Ottoman Empire. Fortunately, exhibitions, imperial prizes, and conversations about photography can settle speculation about nineteenth-century photography's relationship to art in the Ottoman Empire.

The mid-nineteenth century marked the start of the careers of Pascal Sebah and the Abdullah brothers, three of the most important Ottoman photographers of the time. Two Armenian brothers, Vichen and Kevork Abdullah, founded the Abdullah Frères studio in 1858 in the Pera region of Istanbul, which, in addition to photographs, sold miniatures painted on ivory

and oil paintings.[42] On a trip to France in 1860 the brothers met Count Aguado, a French socialite and more importantly, a member of the influential Société Française de Photographie and the Société Helio-graphique. When the brothers returned to the Ottoman Empire, they carried with them a letter from Aguado addressed to the French Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire that stated, "These young men are artists who are deserving of every assistance and encouragement. I beg you to introduce them to important people and pashas in Turkey and to aid them in their advancement."[43] Soon after, the Abdullah Frères received commissions to photograph members of the Sultan's cabinet, and eventually in 1863, were named the official court photographers and were invited to Sultan Abdülaziz's personal hunting lodge to take portraits of the Sultan himself.

1863 also saw Istanbul host the Ottoman General Exposition. This exhibition, based on earlier iterations in London, New York, and Paris, took place when Sultan Abdülaziz's Tanzimat reforms were in full swing.[44] The exhibition, housed on the Hippodrome adjacent to the Hagia Sophia and the Sultan Ahmet Mosque, was an opportunity for the Empire to promote its national identity and demonstrate that it, too, was a modern European power.[45] The Exposition had thirteen categories of display, ranging from agricultural and manufacturing products to minerals and handicrafts, and it attracted tourists, journalists, and businessmen all interested in seeing what the Empire had to offer.[46]

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[42] Öztuncay, *The photographers of Constantinople*, 179.
[43] Ibid., 181.
[44] Zeynep Çelik, *Displaying the Orient: architecture of Islam at nineteenth-century world's fairs* (New York: ACLS History E-Book Project, 2005), 140.
[45] Ibid.
[46] Çelik, *Displaying the Orient*, 140; Öztuncay, *The photographers of Constantinople* 190.

Photography from the Abdullah Frères studio was also a part of this exhibition, but it was displayed in a different context from photographs in most Western European exhibitions. The photographs at the Ottoman Exhibition were not lumped in with agricultural or industrial products but instead included in "Fine Arts" category alongside paintings, books, calligraphy, and architectural drawings.[47]

Unfortunately, there are no records that tell us how the photographs were arranged or how they were (or were not) used in conversation with the surrounding works of art. Nevertheless, there is a significance behind this categorization should not be overlooked. Exhibition organizers had every opportunity to display photography as another technical advancement or a new tool for scientists. Instead, they decided to place it not just with painting, which had a visibly Western European flavor in the nineteenth century, but also alongside calligraphy—a form that would have been recognized as uniquely Ottoman. Photography then was not just on display because it was new and had modern connotations, but because it could project something about Ottoman culture. An event like the Ottoman Exposition was not an "avant-garde" exhibition that made subversive claims about art and photography. It was an imperially sanctioned event presided over by finance minister Mustafa Fazıl Paşa and inaugurated by Sultan Abdülaziz himself.[48] Displaying photography as a fine art in the Ottoman Exhibition then was no accident nor was it the result of a fringe idea within Ottoman culture. It was the doing of the Empire itself and a manifestation of the Sultan's understanding of photography's role in Ottoman culture.

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[47] Çelik, *Displaying the Orient*, 141; Öztuncay, *The photographers of Constantinople* 190.
[48]Bey Salaheddin, "La Turquie à l'Exposition universelle de 1867, ouvrage publié par les soins et sous la direction de S. Exc. Salaheddin Bey,...," Gallica, January 01, 1867, 23, 27, accessed April 27, 2017, http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k840831g/f28.image.

Album Patronage as Art?

In addition to the inclusion of photography in the Ottoman General Exhibition in the category of fine art, there is strong evidence to suggest that the photographers who participated in the Ottoman Exhibition in 1863 as well as Sultan Abdülaziz I, (1861-1876) who was in charge of the empire at the time of the exhibition, would have seen a relationship between photography and art. Sultan Abdülhamid II himself had a very visible and public relationship with photography. His best-known contribution came in the form of the aforementioned 51 albums that he sent to the Library of Congress. It is these albums that have been repeatedly called ethnographic and artistically uninteresting.

In all fairness, the majority of the photographs—schools, cannons, shipyards, etc.—do not have any immediately clear ties to art. To quote Ottoman historian Edhem Eldem's essay for the Camera Ottomana exhibition on Ottoman photography, "to browse through these would have been a monotonous chore, which the occasional views of the Bosphorus, of mosques, or of the Sultan's horses and yachts would have barely enlivened."[49] Furthermore, to my knowledge there are no explicit declarations on the part of Abdülhamid II or the photographers involved in the photo albums labeling these photographs as works of art. Sultan Abdülhamid II was clearly interested in showing the "correct" image of his empire and was aware of photography's ability to affect the image of the Ottoman empire in foreign lands. He lamented in 1892—one year before the albums were sent—that, "Most of the photographs taken [by European photographers] for sale in Europe vilify and mock our Well-Protected Domains. It is imperative that the

[49] Çelik, Eldem, *Camera Ottomana*, 116.

photographs be taken in this instance and do not insult Islamic peoples by showing them in a vulgar and demeaning light."[50]

Most readings of the Abdülhamid II albums appear to be informed by this quote and perhaps this is the reason that other interpretations of the albums tend to focus on its ethnographic and documentary qualities. However, the photo albums were not Abdülhamid II's only patronage project. Abdülhamid II had an equally impressive, though much less studied, program of book patronage that was gifted to the United States that may have some important parallels with his much better-known program of photography patronage.

Abdülhamid II's book donation to the Library of Congress, like his photography donation, appeared to be the result of a friendship with American senator and eventual mayor of New York, Abraham Hewitt. According to a rather flowery article published in the *New York Tribune* on July 31, 1884, Hewitt met Abdülhamid II in 1883 while on a long vacation with Hewitt's family after the death of Hewitt's father-in-law, Peter Cooper (of Cooper Union college fame).[51] While touring the area around the Hagia Sophia, Hewitt's son fainted, apparently overcome by the heat. After being carried to a guard-house and coming to, "two lads of about his own age," took great interest in Hewitt's son.[52] Lo and behold, it turned out that these two lads were Sultan Abdülhamid's children and the elder Hewitt and Abdülhamid ended up having a meeting at the Topkapı Palace where the senator regaled the sultan with the details of American government and the eccentricities of the caucus system.

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[50] Roberts, *The limits of Circumscription*, 53.
[51] "The Near East Library and "The Sultan's Gifts"," Bulletin of the Society for the Libraries of New York University 74 (Summer 1968):.
[52] Ibid.

During the meeting, Abdülhamid II apparently took great interest in Hewitt's copying pencils and expressed his affinity for the difficult to attain (for a Turk) Virginia tobacco. Upon his return to the United States, Hewitt sent back fifty pounds of Virginia tobacco as well as three gold-trimmed pencils. The Sultan's reciprocal gift of twelve Turkish rugs came in Christmas of that year. One year later, in the Christmas of 1884, Hewitt received a letter from the Sultan who expressed his desire to send Hewitt every book printed in Turkish from 1453 to 1884. According to Hewitt's son, this came in the form of "three hundred and ninety-five volumes, every one bound in red morocco and stamped in gold with his coat of arms and a gift inscription in French and English."[53] Hewitt never took ownership of the gift himself given the fact that accepting such honor first required him to pay a $1,480 customs duty. The senator circumvented the problem by suggesting that the Sultan instead donate the books to the Library of Congress, which made them duty free.[54]

It would be nice to think that an American public curious to learn more about the Ottoman Empire eagerly read these books, but the reality is less interesting. It appears that Abdülhamid II's gifts sat dormant in storage for many years and were never really inspected. It is difficult then to draw conclusions about their reception. However, an examination of the contents of this book donation can perhaps reveal something about how the Sultan understood these books and by extension, the later photography albums.

A scan of the titles in the book donation shows that many of the texts, like many of the counterpart photographs, are of little to no interest from an artistic perspective. The texts focus on such subjects as criminal justice, cholera treatments, the North Pole, military tactics, and

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[53] "The Sultan's Gifts," The New Yorker, March 9, 1940, 14.
[54]"The Sultan's Gifts," 15.

environmental science. These books, like the monotonous photos of schools, cannons, and shipyards, were likely sent to demonstrate to Americans the Ottoman engagement with new technology. However, not all of the books were scientific or technological manuals. Tucked in between those are some strange outliers, for example, Ottoman Turkish translations of Shakespeare, Alexandre Dumas, and collections of philosophy and Arab philology.

These books would have shown the Ottoman Empire not just as a technological power, but as a cultural one as well. No great empire has ever been established on technology alone and a collection of technical manuals would not have been sufficient evidence to suggest that the Ottoman Empire was on the same level as its rapidly industrializing and culture-producing counterparts in Britain and France. The inclusion of Ottoman translations of great works of literature would have shown that the Sultan was in charge of an empire interested in engaging with both its own Islamic roots and in the literary traditions of Western Europe.

Perhaps, then, the photography albums can be read in a similar light. There may be little use in looking for any artistic aspirations in the images cataloguing Ottoman technological advancement in the same way that reading a book about the Prussian military will likely not be an enriching literary experience. However, that does not exclude the medium itself from being a way of projecting culture. The photographs of cannons may be dry and documentary, but what about the mosques, the palaces, or the cityscapes? What about the people in the photographs? If the largely technical and documentary profile of the book donation was still able to present a message about Ottoman culture, perhaps there is a way the largely technical and documentary collection of images in the Abdülhamid II can go beyond their content and become works of art in and of themselves.

CHAPTER FOUR
AN OTTOMAN EYE

If Ottoman photographers did indeed exhibit agency over the camera and did on some level understand photography as an art form, then it is worth investigating if and how Ottoman photographers incorporated their own artistic traditions into photography. Obviously, each culture has its own artistic traditions and methods of depiction. Certain signs or symbols mean very different things in different cultural contexts and two different artistic traditions may choose to depict the same idea in strikingly different ways.

It is doubtful that anyone even mildly interested in art history would not already know this, but when working with photography, it is an idea worth rearticulating. The camera itself is not a 'neutral' technology. It is a French invention that, by virtue of its potential to accurately capture the physical contours of a scene, carries an unavoidable initial grounding in 'realism' that traditional Ottoman forms of depiction did not have. If a sixteenth century Ottoman painter were handed a camera he would find it quite difficult to get this technology to conform to his preferred mode of depiction. To take just a few examples of the aesthetic and representational choices that were typical of Ottoman painting, a camera, unlike a painting, requires either heavy manipulation or a very specific angle to depict anything going on behind a wall, to make foreground and background figures similar size, or to populate the entirety of an image plane with figures or other objects. This though, does not mean that the instant an Ottoman photographer got behind the camera he had no choice but to conform to the camera's mechanical eye. As demonstrated earlier, there is a great deal that a photographer can do to take agency over

the photograph and to bring a uniquely Ottoman voice out of an undeniably Western European invention.

The photographers who contributed to the Abdülhamid II albums were not isolated provincials who knew nothing apart from the canon of Ottoman visual tradition. Istanbul in the nineteenth century was a thriving cosmopolitan metropolis with multi-lingual street signs, merchants, and embassies from all over the world. These photographers would have come into regular contact with Western European culture and thus would not have necessarily been tethered to prior Ottoman visual traditions. The goal of the photographic albums was also to show the rest of the world that the Ottoman Empire was a modern power that could match the clout of Britain, France, and America. Thus, there would have been a desire then to use the albums to align the visual representation of the Ottoman Empire with that of these rival regional powers. At the same time, the photo albums show that there was a desire to portray the Empire as unapologetically Ottoman. There is no sense that Sultan Abdülhamid II was in any way embarrassed about the things—mosque architecture, calligraphy, ethnic groups not present West of the Dardanelles—that made the Ottoman Empire stand apart from Western Europe. The repetition of these subjects in the albums suggests that there was a desire to foreground what made the Ottoman Empire different from its counterparts, and there is evidence that this mindset found its way into the photographer's' eyes.

Photography in the Service of Art and Empire

As mentioned in the first chapter, Ottoman painters had different ways of depicting visual truth. If a Western European painter in the Italian Renaissance tradition were tasked with accurately depicting a castle or a cityscape, he or she would be careful to set up vanishing points, establish a horizon line, and perhaps position the most important part of the image on one of the

vanishing points in accordance with the Western European rules of perspective. One might assume that the invention of the camera meant that these steps could happen automatically, but that was not the case. A photographer who wanted to adhere to Western European visual conventions would have to position the camera in the perfect location to capture such an image. It takes more than a camera to make a photograph that adheres to the ideals of image making in the Western European tradition. Conversely, this means that not every photograph taken with a camera is automatically locked into the confines of Western modes of depiction. If a Western photographer has to work to take a photograph that conforms to his or her artistic traditions the perhaps an Ottoman photographer could make an effort to photograph with a uniquely Ottoman eye.

Ottoman methods of depicting truth in an image did not always conform to ideas of 'naturalistic' or perspectival truth. Instead, as mentioned in Chapter One, painters in the Ottoman tradition often preferred elevated vantage points that allowed for a large-scale view over an entire scene. A painting from a 'God's-eye view,' so to speak, could show a far wider perspectival range within an image.[55] When the artist manipulated perspective to his own needs in a painting, he was able to show the topographical arrangement of a palace complex while also showing the details on the walls in front of the palace, or the people on ground level. A photographer, on the other hand, would have to make a decision between a true aerial view that could show a scene with all of its topographical elements and features, or a head-on view that might show one wall in great detail at the expense of everything obscured by that wall. If a

[55] Inspiration for "God's-eye-view" comes from Orhan Pamuk's "My Name is Red." The scene was depicted from an elevated vantage point but also had a multi-dimensionality that a true bird's eye view would not.

photographer's goal is to represent the widest possible field of visual information, a photographer has to find a vantage somewhere between these two extremes.

A well-chosen (or just as well a poorly-chosen) vantage point shows that the camera does not automatically impose the aesthetic found in Western European painting. A photo in the Abdülhamid II albums of the *Vue de l'Arsenal* in Istanbul taken by the Abdullah Frères studio appears to be one result of an Ottoman photographer figuring out how to push his aesthetic preferences through the apparatus of the camera (Fig. 17). The photograph of a city block along the banks of the Bosphorus was not taken from ground level nor did the photographer use vanishing points or banks converging on the horizon to point out the focus of the image. This Abdullah Frères photo is instead taken from an elevated vantage point giving the impression that the viewer is hovering above scene rather than standing in it.

Fig. 17. Abdullah Frères. *View of the Naval Arsenal and the Golden Horn*. Between 1880 and 1893. Photograph. From the Library of Congress, https://goo.gl/V6WUHp.

This stack of horizontals means that any attempt to read the transversals in search of a point of convergence will only result in a headache. The most obvious medium for creating a nice, clean vanishing point in this photograph—the river-like Bosphorus—is splayed horizontally across the screen eliminating the possibility of the river banks creating a nice point of convergence for the eye to rest on. Streets, another favorite of painters interested in depicting converging lines of perspective, also run parallel to the horizon sacrificing their potential to lead the eye to a vanishing point.

While it is true that prior to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Ottoman painters were not interested in strict adherence to Western modes of perspective, their absence in this photograph does not mean that it necessarily has any ties to the Ottoman visual tradition. Ottoman manipulations had a purpose beyond aesthetic preference. As noted above this aesthetic choice could have been made simply to provide more information about the scene depicted. The transcendence of Western European concepts of perspective was meant to show as much of a scene as possible and to portray the scene in a way that was more authentic—in the Ottoman view—than an image that had to tightly adhere to the rules of European style 'scientific' perspective.

With this in mind, a potential Ottoman eye starts to come out in this image. The photographer, because he was stuck behind a camera lens, would have been unable to truly conform to a visual tradition that could create imaginary (and impossible in the real world) scenes where multiple perspectives were visible at once, but he could certainly try and pretend that he was doing so. The imagined, multi-dimensional view in Ottoman painting made itself quite clearly present in depictions of architecture and cities. For example, the cityscape in this image of the siege of Belgrade (Fig. 18) is not a neat row of grid streets that all converge into the

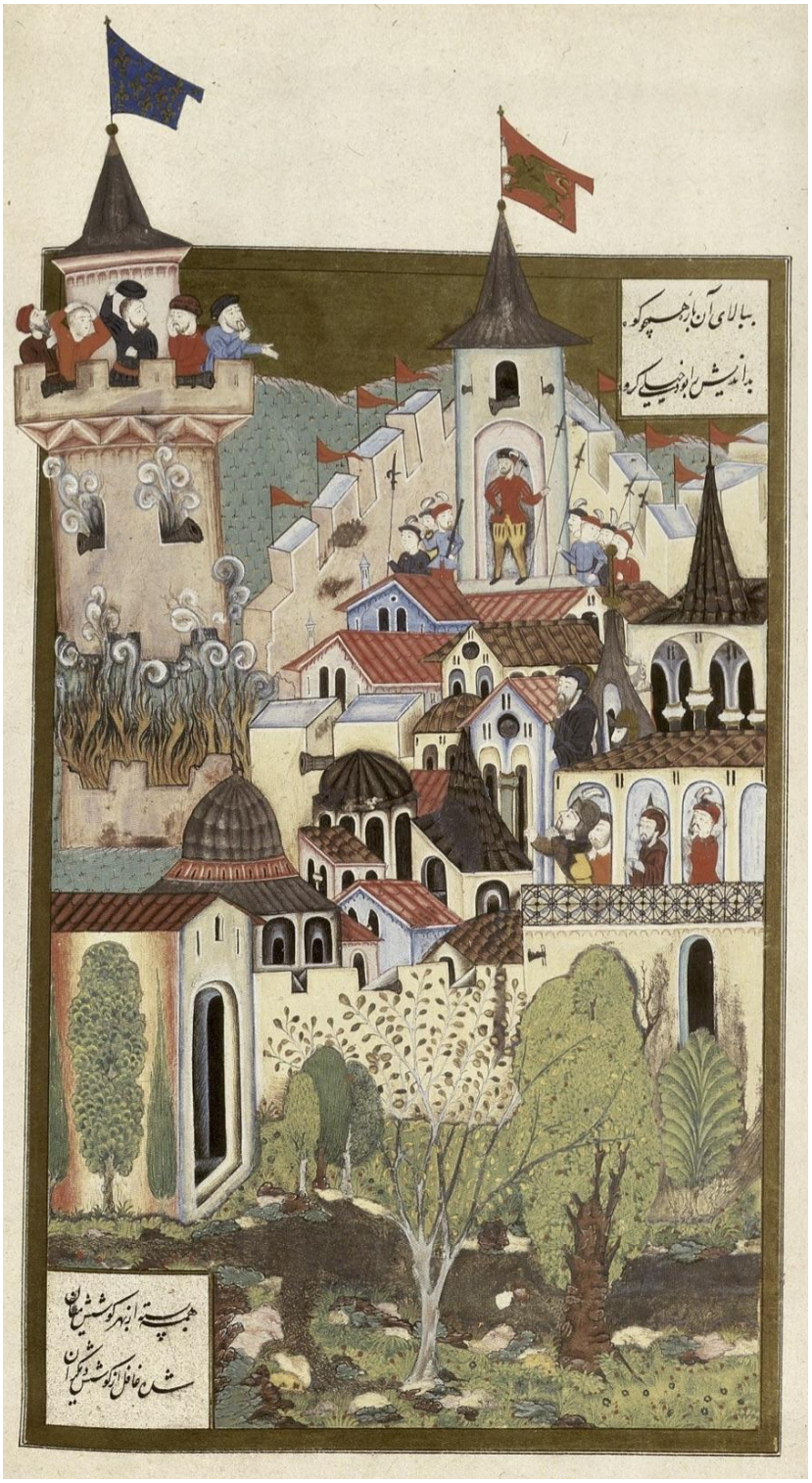

Fig. 18. Painter A, 'Siege of Belgrade.' 1558. 23 x 15 cm. *Süleymanname*. From: Günsel Rendal et al. *A History of Turkish Painting.* Genève: Palasar in association with the University of Washington Press, 1988. Folio 109a.

distance. After looking at this photo, one might imagine that the streets in this scene would be an inconvenient tangle of dead ends and corners. The perspective lines drawn from the rooftops and doorways shoot in all different directions and almost all of the buildings are displayed at oblique angles. This gives the impression that the viewer is taking in multiple perspectives at the same time and allows for more of the city to be visible than would be possible in a ground-level view that attempted to make the display of Western European conceptions of perspective a key part of the image.

With this in mind, the Abdullah Frères view of Istanbul may still be a tool for documenting the city, but it does so using what appears to be a uniquely Ottoman aesthetic. Vichen Abdullah, the likely photographer here, would not have been able to show multiple dimensions of the city at once, but by choosing an elevated vantage point (as an Ottoman painter would have), he seems to be playing with the impression that he can. The buildings here, like those in the *Siege of Belgrade*, are all displayed at oblique angles and the diagonals from the walls and rooftops scatter in different directions rather than resolving on a particular point of convergence. The decision to find a vantage point from where he could compose the city block as a jumble of buildings obscures the street itself, but it means that the photographer can show more of the compact city block and can include both the city and the Bosphorus in the image. Perhaps this image is a continuation of the aforementioned Ottoman understanding of elevated, almost topographic, views as the most accurate way of depicting a scene. Even if this is true, this photograph may still be first and foremost a way to document the modernizations of the Ottoman Empire. However, if it was indeed Vichen Abdullah's (who was himself once a renowned painter of miniatures in the nineteenth-century, naturalistic Ottoman painting tradition) intention to

allude to paintings that broke the rules of perspective and to compose the image, then this method of documentation cannot have its full effect without some understanding of the photographer's uniquely Ottoman eye.[56]

It is not just topographical views that suggest Ottoman photographers understood their work as art having potential connections to prior Ottoman visual traditions. One of the 51 albums in the Abdülhamid II collection of particular interest is composed of Abdullah Frères photos of the Topkapı Palace. Included in the album are photographs of the art itself found in the palace treasuries. There are photographs of manuscript pages, calligraphic spandrels, and beautifully composed groups of swords. These images have, in their subject matter alone, undeniable ties to prior Ottoman traditions. It would be difficult to imagine how a photographer could take these images *without* making any connections between photography and Ottoman art.

Other photographs in the album though, suggest that the artistic undertones present in the images from the treasury may in fact carry over to other subjects. One particular photograph of the palace interior suggests that the photographer hoped to maintain a traditionally Ottoman aesthetic through the use of photography (Fig. 19). Describing the photograph is a difficult task given the image's asymmetric composition. The photograph is composed in rough quadrants arranged over a band of carpet at the bottom of the image. The top left quadrant contains a square of hexagonal geometric designs framed by a border of ornately patterned tiles. The sharp angles and apexes of the hexagonal pattern are contrasted with an arched doorway that takes up about two-thirds of the right two quadrants and which is topped by a calligraphic panel. The bottom left quadrant contains a square of what appear to be Iznik floral patterned tiles flanked on

[56] Waley, "Images of The Ottoman Empire" 119.

either side by a pair of rounded Hovan arch panels filled decorated with leafy, floral motif spirals.

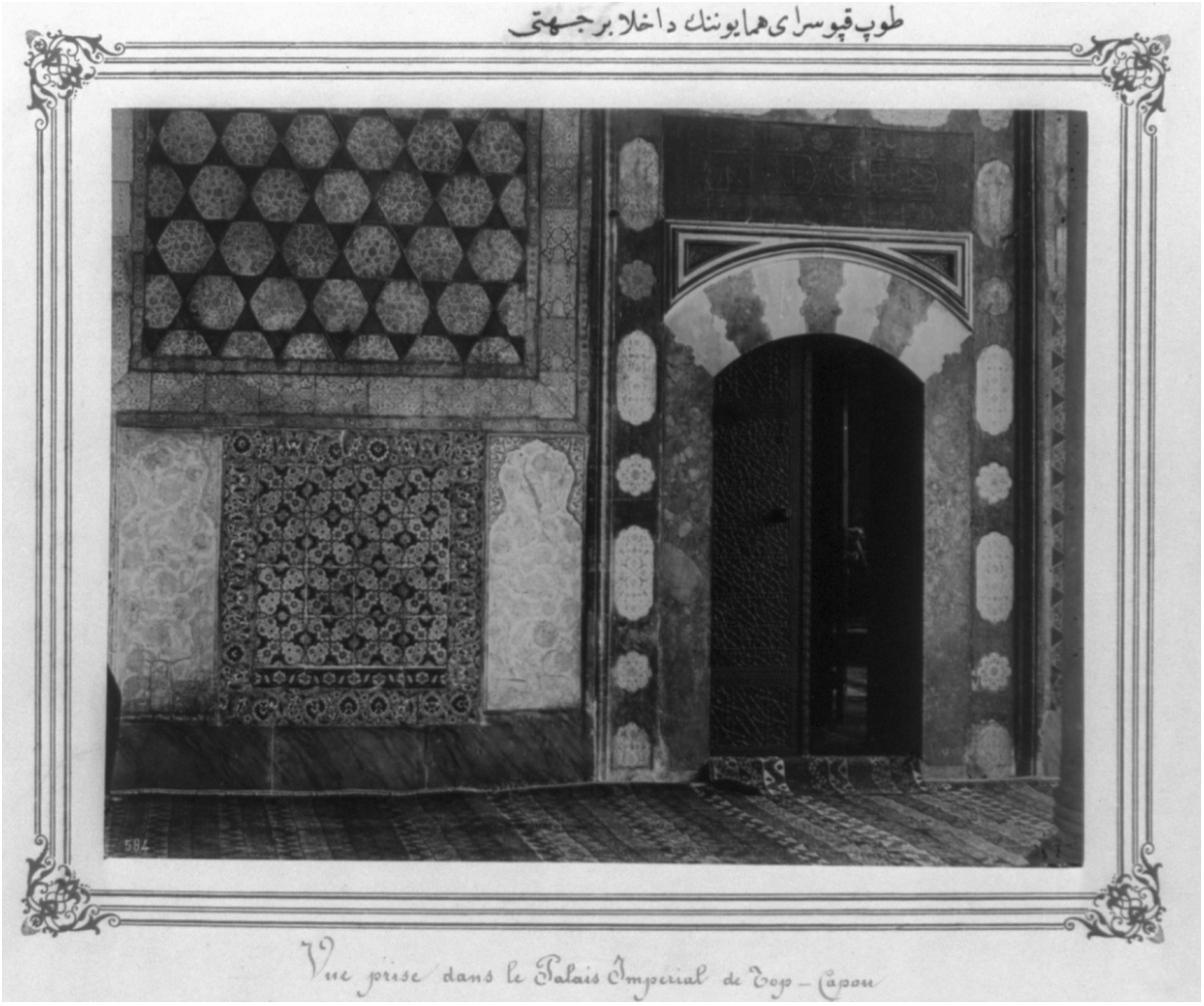

Fig. 19. Abdullah Frères. *Interior view of the Imperial Topkapı Sarayı (palace).* Between 1880 and 1893. Photograph. From the Library of Congress: http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/ahii/item/2003667112/.

The close-up shot and asymmetry give the image a strong impression of two-dimensionality that appears to evoke the collage-like geometric designs that were common in certain miniature paintings (Fig. 20). This is partly a factor of the subject matter itself—the walls of the palace interior are themselves a collage of deliberately juxtaposed different designs—but it

also seems to be a conscious choice on the part of the photographer. There is no attempt to center the doorway or the tile squares to make them the focus of the image.

Fig. 20. Painter A, 'Süleiman Entertained.' 1558. *Süleymanname*. From: Günsel Rendal et al. A History of Turkish Painting. Genève: Palasar in association with the University of Washington Press, 1988. Folio 71a.

Fig. 21. Sebah & Joaillier. Students, Middle School at Ayasofya, between 1880 and 1893. Photograph. From the Library of Congress, http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/ahii/item/2001699209/.

A Western viewer may initially see this image as disorganized or poorly composed, but the reality is that this would likely have been a conscious decision on the part of the photographer. Placing the door off-center, including the patterned carpet, and cutting off the top half of the hexagonal tile pattern have the effect of filling up the entire image with geometric designs. This photograph then is not so much a photograph of a door or a particular motif in the

tiling on the wall. The goal of the image instead appears to be the creation of an abstract collage of the varied geometric patterns that fill up the lavish walls of the palace. This 'visual collage' is far from extraordinary; it was in fact a common motif in traditional Ottoman book arts. However, in this example it is photography rather than painting that achieves this end. The western-invented camera in this case, did not obscure the Ottoman eye.

Of course, photographs of the Topkapı Palace and the Bosphorus have more artistic potential than other subject matter. Speaking from firsthand experience, even an amateur hack can make a beautiful photograph with these subjects. The overwhelming majority of the Abdülhamid II albums do not include great works of architecture or panoramic vistas but dry and seemingly uninteresting photos of students, industrialization efforts, and military projects. Some of the images are almost remarkable in their apparent lack of attention to aesthetics. This photograph by the Sebah & Joaillier studio—an enterprise founded in part by Pascal Sebah's son Jean Pascal Sebah—seems to fit into this category of artistically uninteresting documentary photographs (Fig. 21).

The two boys in the photograph are middle school students—hardly the favored trope of great artists—standing on a rug in front of a nondescript landscape background. They are both positioned perfectly upright with their hands folded over their stomachs, dressed in dark shoes, pants, collarless shirts, and fez hats. There does not appear to be anything to link this image to prior Ottoman painting traditions; there is a deep background, no architectural composition, no elaborate patterns, and no manipulations of perspective. One might imagine that a French photographer could have taken this photo with no regard to Ottoman aesthetics.

This though, is not a likely scenario, as the posture and body language of the subjects reveals. The pose adopted by the two boys, in which they stand with slightly awkward hands

folded over the stomach, is in fact a position known as *el pençe divan*. This pose was an Ottoman symbol of deference and is often seen in miniature paintings of the sultan and his subjects (also visible in the previous Fig. 20).[57] The boys stand posed like two pages in an Ottoman miniature painting awaiting an audience with the Sultan. This image then was not just included so that Americans could see Ottoman class pictures and be reassured that there were students in Ottoman middle schools. The fuller meaning was likely that these students were committing themselves to education in the name of the Sultan. Their education was not just for their own betterment, but for the betterment of the Empire. This particular pose, which is repeated elsewhere by other photographs in the Abdülhamid II albums, would have added a meaning that required a viewer to understand Ottoman traditions. More importantly, it would also have required a photographer who would have understood Ottoman symbolism and iconography.

A New Meaning for them All?

It would be fun to imagine that these photographs hold the key to unlocking the rest of the Abdülhamid II albums, and that the adoption of an Ottoman eye could radically change the understanding of every photo in the collection. This though, does not seem to be the case. For every one picture that appears to play with a topographical view or a manipulation of perspective, there are seemingly dozens more that would be impervious to such a reading (Fig. 22). There are plenty of photos of the Bosphorus or an Istanbul neighborhood that are taken from eye-level and seem to boast of their adherence to naturalistic perspective, photos of the Topkapı Palace that do not seem so determined in their efforts to imitate miniature painting composition, and there are countless pictures of school children who are not displaying the *el pençe divan*

[57] Zeynep Çelik and Edhem Eldem, Camera Ottomana: Photography and Modernity in the Ottoman Empire 1840-1914 (Istanbul: Koç Univ. Press, 2015), 136.

pose. It would likely be unproductive to try and stretch a uniquely Ottoman framework over every single image. However, if photographs, like the Sebah & Joaillier students, that seem quite dry at first glance turn out to contain uniquely Ottoman methods of communication, then perhaps there is more hidden meaning in the Abdülhamid II albums than was originally thought and more insight to be gained about the art of Ottoman photography.

Fig. 22. Abdullah Frères. *The Galata Tower.* Between 1880 and 1893. Photograph. From the Library of Congress. http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003668116/.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

At first glance, photography appears irreconcilable with an Ottoman artistic tradition that commonly employed abstraction and an elevated eye vantage point. A painter is clearly able to manipulate a scene to the vision held in his imagination. A nineteenth century Ottoman photographer, one might assume, would be limited by what the camera would see. And thus, it would seem disingenuous to call an Ottoman photographer an artist on par with an Ottoman painter. The reality though, is that the two might have more similarities than one might think.

Ottoman painting in the nineteenth century looked quite different from Ottoman painting in prior ages. New art academies and studies in Western Europe meant that Ottoman painting took on a different form that adhered to the conventions of scientific perspective, and tended to favor naturalism over the stylization that was once a key visual signifier of Ottoman painting. At the same time that Ottoman painting was starting to look more like photography, and at a time when Ottoman artists were actually using photographs as models for their paintings, photographers were starting to take control over the French invention known as the camera in a way that parallels the way painters could more clearly take control over their canvases. Photographers used post-production manipulations as well as clever angles and posed scenes to take control of images that may have found their way into storefronts, newspapers, or the Library of Congress. These contexts would invite different meanings, and the close examination of Ottoman photographs suggests that the photographers knew how to exert their agency over the apparatus of the camera in order to create an image that adhered to the needs of these different contexts.

This, combined with the fact that Ottoman photographers, their patrons, and exhibition organizers seemed quite comfortable referring to photographers as artists and juxtaposing photography with other forms widely understood as art, suggests that there is good reason to read at least some Ottoman photographs as works of late-Ottoman art. Plenty of prior scholarship has, not without reason, focused on Ottoman photographs' documentary value. Ottoman photographs are excellent primary source documents for understanding the latter years of the Empire. However, to say that these photographs are the product of "innocent modernists" or neutral scientific observation appears to ignore an artistic potential in photography that Ottoman photographers openly recognized. I hope that further scholarship attempts to understand Ottoman photography as art specific to the late Ottoman Empire.

I have attempted to make my own analyses of Ottoman photographs using an understanding of Ottoman photography informed by these aforementioned observations. However, I recognize that this can hardly be considered a comprehensive study. My analysis (due in part to my limited, though nonetheless quite rich, access to primary source photographs) has focused mostly on the work of Pascal Sebah, the Sebah & Joaillier studio, and the Abdullah Frères studio. This small sample size is made primarily of Ottoman Christians of Armenian descent—no doubt still Ottoman, but of a very specific slice of the diverse and cosmopolitan Empire. I have not spent any time in the paper analyzing the work of Greek photographer Vasiliki Kargopoulo nor the primarily Muslim photographers employed by the Ottoman military.

Furthermore, I recognize that I have tossed the word "modernism" around without really attempting to understand how a reading of Ottoman photographs as works of art changes the meaning of Ottoman modernism or vice versa. A clearer articulation of Ottoman modernism would no doubt bring out a more robust analysis of the photographs. Alas, using that

understanding to bring out even more concealed meaning or to change the meaning of Ottoman Modernism will have to come at a later time.

If indeed the *el pençe divan* pose, interesting camera angles, and carefully composed scenes are the results of Ottoman artistic aspirations, then surely these are not the only visual threads in Ottoman photography. Perhaps different communities in and outside of Istanbul had their own visual languages that could tell a more complete story of Ottoman photography as art. Regardless, I believe that a more focused study that seeks to interpret a wider range of Ottoman photography as art and more clearly articulate the tendencies of the Ottoman eye, could reveal a wealth of new information and conventions.

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